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ABSTRACT

Conflict and disagreement are not only inevitable, but fundamental to successful change. A key to managing conflict between principal parties is each party's attribution of the other's intent. This study tests the relationship between (1) principals' personality predisposition and their self-attributed conflict resolution behavior; (2) teacher commitment and the conflict resolution behavior teachers attributed to their principals; (3) teachers' perception of conflict level and the conflict resolution behavior that teachers attributed to their principals; (4) principals' perception of conflict level and the conflict resolution behavior that principals attributed to their teachers; and (5) principals' self-attributed conflict resolution behavior and the conflict resolution behavior that teachers attributed to the principals. The sample comprised 47 middle level public schools in south central Pennsylvania. Data were collected using principal and teacher questionnaires, and four instruments were used to analyze data. The response rate for principals was 91 percent, and that for teachers was 75 percent. Participants generally perceived moderate to low conflict levels in their buildings. Both groups generally agreed about sources of conflict. Teachers and principals also agreed about conflict resolution behavior; cooperative modes occurred more frequently than competitive modes. Concerning personality predisposition, principals seemed more relationship- than task-oriented. Mean scores for organizational identification, involvement, and loyalty revealed substantial teacher commitment. Other results and implications are discussed in detail. Included are eight references. (MLH)

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PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS: USING COOPERATIVE STRATEGIES TO MANAGE CONFLICT AND IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, public education has been the target of severe criticism and numerous reform proposals. Such public attention can create a climate for real school reform. Teachers want to be more involved in the decision making process. Principals want more involved and committed teachers. Involvement, commitment and faculty ownership are highly desirable goals, but widespread involvement of staff is not an easy process.

Conflict and disagreement are not only inevitable but fundamental to successful change. Since any group of people possesses multiple realities, any collective change attempt will necessarily involve conflict. It is , therefore, critical that school principals have an understanding of the influences and relationships of conflict interactions with teachers serving under their leadership.

According to Thomas and Pondy (1977), a key to managing conflict between principal parties is the attribution by each party of the other's intent. This study examined relationships between attributed conflict resolution behavior, level of conflict, organizational commitment, and leader personality predisposition in the principal-teacher dyad. Understanding these relationships may produce greater appreciation of both the position and the identity of the other party and self, and, generally, an increase in the level of understanding between principals and teachers in the work place.

The review of literature described conflict as having the capacity to produce both productive and destructive effects. Until recently, scholars have presented conflict as undesirable and detrimental to the organization. The current perspective defines conflict as an inevitable consequence of human interaction in all important relationships. Conflict is no longer viewed as negative and to be avoided, but accepted and managed to the organization's advantage.

The shift in empahsis from the elimination of conflict to the management of conflict has made the supervisor-subordinate dyad an appropriate unit of analysis for inquiry into the conflict phenomena. As supervisors and subordinates interact in organizations, conflict often arises as a result of differing perceptions or one party's attributing intent to another party's behavior. Such factors as the level of conflict, the particular strategies individuals use to resolve conflict, and the personality of the participants interact to influence the course of the conflict episode.

METHOD

This research was designed to test the relationship between (1) principals' personality predisposition and their self-attributed conflict resolution behavior, (2) teacher commitment and the conflict resolution behavior teachers attributed to their principals, (3) teachers' perception of level of conflict and the conflict resolution behavior

teachers attributed to their principals, (4) principals' perception of level of conflict and the conflict resolution behavior principals attributed to their teachers, and (5) principals' self-attributed conflict resolution behavior and the conflict resolution behavior teachers attributed to the principals. In addition, selected demographic data were collected and examined.

Sample

The sample consisted of 47 middle level public schools in south central Pennsylvania. An explanatory letter was sent to each principal identifying the researcher, describing the research project, and soliciting his or her assistance in the study. This letter was followed one week later by a personal telephone contact intended to confirm their participation.

Procedure

The data for the research study were collected by means of principal and teacher questionnaires. A questionnaire package was mailed to each of the 47 principals. Each package contained one principal questionnaire with cover letter and eight teacher questionnaires with cover letters. Each respondent returned the questionnaire by mail directly to the researcher using a self-addressed stamped envelope.

The principal questionnaire contained instruments designed to measure conflict resolution behavior (both self-and teacher-attributed), perception of source and amount of conflict, and personality predisposition. The

teacher questionnaire was designed to measure principal attributed conflict resolution behavior, perception of conflict, and commitment to the organization.

Insturments

Conflict resolution behaviors were measured by a 25-item instrument developed by Howat and London (1980) and later adapted for educational organizations. The instrument has proven to be highly reliable. Five items measured each of the following conflict-handling strategies: confrontation, withdrawal, forcing, smoothing, and compromise.

Perceptions of level of conflict were measured by a 10-item instrument, each item representing specific issues of conflict in school organizations. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used throughout to describe behavior which rarely occurs to a description of very typical behavior which almost always occurs.

Fiedler's Least Preferred Co-worker (LPC) scale was used to measure principal personality predisposition. Based on a variety of research evidence, Fiedler (1967) has proposed that low-LPC leaders are basically task-oriented and that high-LPC leaders are basically relationship-oriented. Finally, organizational commitment was measured by a 9-item scale developed by Cook et al. (1981). Three items measured each of the following subscales: organizational identification, involvement, and loyalty.

Demographic information was also collected from both parties so that relationships might be viewed as they related to the main variables. Usable returns were received from 91% of the principals and 75% of the teachers.

Statistical Analysis

The data were first coded and scores for each of the variables were calculated. Pearson-product moment correlation coefficients were utilized to measure the quantitative relationships for Hypotheses One through Four, as well as relationships between demographic and main variables. Bartlett's Test for Homogeneity of Variance was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences between principals' and teachers' conflict resolution behaviors examined in Hypothesis Five. Minimum level of acceptability for statistical significance was established at the .05 level of confidence for all statistical analyses in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mean scores for the main variables revealed that the principals and teachers in this study generally perceived moderate to low levels of conflict in their buildings. Principals and teachers were also in general agreement regarding the sources of conflict in their buildings, with perceptions differing significantly on only 2 of the 10 conflict issues.

Mean scores for conflict resolution behavior revealed similar agreement with regard to principals and teachers

attributed conflict resolution behavior. The cooperative conflict-handling modes, confrontation, compromise, and smoothing, were rated as occurring more frequently than the uncooperative modes, withdrawal and forcing, by both teachers and principals. This finding was similar to results found in other samples (Howat & London, 1980; London & Howat, 1978; Zammuto, London, & Rowland, 1979).

Principal personality predisposition (LPC score) received a total mean score of 90.35 for the 43 principals in the study. The potential range for a total LPC score was from 16 to 128, indicating that principals in this sample were generally more relationship-oriented than task-oriented in interpersonal style.

Finally, mean scores for organizational identification, involvement, and loyalty revealed high levels of teacher commitment on all three organizational commitment subscales. Teachers indicated the highest commitment in organizational involvement or willingness to work hard for the organization.

One of the major questions which this investigation was designed to clarify concerned the relationship between the principal's personality predisposition and his or her self-attributed conflict resolution behavior. The review of the related literature led the researcher to predict that relationship-oriented principals would view themselves as utilizing the cooperative conflict resolution strategies in conflict situations with teachers, while the uncooperative

modes, forcing and withdrawal, would more likely be used by task-oriented principals. Although correlation coefficients indicated that relationships existed in the predicted direction (inverse relationships between LPC and self-attributed use of withdrawing and forcing behaviors), none were significant at the .05 level of confidence, thus Hypothesis One was not statistically supported by the findings of this investigation.

Very strong relationships were found to exist between teachers' commitment to the organization and the conflict resolution behavior they attributed to the principals. The results are presented in Table 1. Strong positive relationships were found between teacher commitment and attributed principal use of confrontation, smoothing, and compromise. Relationships between teacher commitment and principal attributed use of withdrawing and forcing behaviors were extremely negative.

Hypothesis Three examined relationships between teachers' perceptions of conflict frequency and principal attributed conflict resolution behavior. Table 2 shows that as teachers perceived principals as using more withdrawing and forcing behaviors to resolve conflict, they perceived increased levels of conflict in their buildings. On the other hand, their perceptions of level of conflict decreased as they perceived increased principal use of confronting, compromising, and smoothing conflict resolution behaviors.

Table 1

Relationship Between Teachers' Attribution of Principals' Conflict Resolution Behavior and Teachers' Commitment to the Organization

Variables	N	r	df	p
Confronting and Organizational Identification	283	.43	281	.01
Organizational Involvement	282	.28	280	.01
Organizational Loyalty	283	.23	281	.01
Withdrawing and Organizational Identification	283	-.31	281	.01
Organizational Involvement	282	-.18	280	.01
Organizational Loyalty	283	-.22	281	.01
Forcing and Organizational Identification	283	-.34	281	.01
Organizational Involvement	282	-.21	280	.01
Organizational Loyalty	283	-.14	281	.01
Smoothing and Organizational Identification	283	.34	281	.01
Organizational Involvement	282	.22	280	.01
Organizational Loyalty	283	.09	281	NS
Compromising and Organizational Identification	283	.35	281	.01
Organizational Involvement	282	.17	280	.01
Organizational Loyalty	283	.05	281	NS

All five relationships were significant well beyond the .01 level of confidence.

Table 2

Relationship Between Teachers' Perception of Level of Conflict and Teachers' Attribution of Principals' Conflict Resolution Behavior

Variables	N	r	df	p
Level of Conflict and Confronting	283	-.42	281	.01
Level of Conflict and Withdrawing	283	.41	281	.01
Level of Conflict and Forcing	283	.24	281	.01
Level of Conflict Smoothing	283	-.22	281	.01
Level of Conflict and Compromising	283	-.25	281	.01

Also examined was the relationship between principals' perception of level of conflict and their perception of their teachers' conflict resolution behavior. No significant relationship between level of conflict and any of the five subsets of attributed conflict resolution behavior was indicated. Apparently the way principals in this study perceived teacher conflict resolution behavior was not related to the way they perceived conflict levels in their buildings. However, additional analyses related to these two main variables found statistically significant relationships between principals' perception of conflict and their self-attributed conflict resolution behavior. Table 3 shows that as principals perceived increased levels of

conflict they reported significantly more self-attributed use of withdrawing and forcing behaviors. As previously noted, the same relationships were found in Hypothesis Three, where teachers perceived increased conflict or poor climate to be positively related to attributed principals' use of these two uncooperative behaviors. The climate or level of conflict appeared to be more related to principals' self-perceptions than to their attributed perceptions. Perhaps subconsciously, principals felt responsible for the climate in their schools. Thus, as they perceived themselves as more forcing and/or withdrawing, it may have been a consequence of their feelings about the climate.

Table 3

Relationship Between Principals' Perception of Level of Conflict and Principals' Self-attributed Conflict Resolution Behavior

Variables	N	r	df	p
Level of Conflict and Confronting	43	-.25	41	NS
Level of Conflict and Withdrawing	43	.45	41	.01
Level of Conflict and Forcing	43	.34	41	.05
Level of Conflict and Smoothing	43	-.11	41	NS
Level of Conflict and Compromising	43	-.09	41	NS

Hypothesis Five proposed that no significant difference would be found between principals' self-attributions of conflict resolution behavior and teachers' attributions of their principals' conflict

resolution behavior. Analysis of the data indicated this was not the case. Statistically significant differences existed between self- and teacher-attributed confrontation, withdrawal, smoothing, and compromise. Only forcing failed to yield a significant difference. Principals viewed themselves as significantly more confronting, smoothing, and compromising. Teachers viewed the principals as significantly more withdrawing. It must be pointed out, however, that although the teachers in this study viewed the principals as more withdrawing, they still saw this behavior as the least frequently used of the five conflict resolution strategies. The two uncooperative behaviors, withdrawing and forcing, tended to be the least frequently used behaviors reported, although principals gave themselves more credit by rating themselves as less forcing and withdrawing than teaches rated them. This suggests that principals may be viewing their own behavior through "rose-colored glasses." If principals hope to effectively manage conflict in their schools, they must be able to accurately and realistically assess their own behavior during a conflict episode.

The findings presented in this investigation have implications for school principals who believe conflict can be constructively managed through positive interactions and relationships with teachers. Mean scores and standard deviations showed that confrontation, compromise, and smoothing formed one group of conflict-handling strategies that tended to be rated differently from forcing and withdrawal. Confrontation, smoothing, and compromise were viewed as most frequently used by both principals and teachers. Forcing and withdrawing behaviors were rated as least frequently used by both parties.

The results of this study indicated that teachers' attributions of principals' conflict resolution behavior is significantly related to teachers' perceptions of level of conflict and commitment to the organization. Again, the cooperative-competitive dichotomy was evident. Teachers perceived the cooperative conflict-handling modes--confrontation, compromise, and smoothing--as positively related to their commitment to the organization, and negatively related to the level of conflict in their buildings. Conversely, as teachers perceived principals as using more withdrawing and forcing behaviors, they perceived increased levels of conflict in their buildings.

These findings provided support for the research on cooperation and competition as advanced by Deutsch (1973) and Tjosvold (1984). These researchers found that cooperation between leader and subordinate facilitated social interaction and productivity.

In summary, clear relationships existed between attributed conflict-handling behavior, school, and organizational commitment. It appears that if principals wish to maintain a positive climate and increase teacher commitment to the organization, they should avoid use of competitive or uncooperative conflict resolution behaviors. Conversely, principal use of the confronting or problem-solving conflict strategy will reap the greatest rewards in terms of improved climate (lower levels of conflict) and increased teacher commitment. However, improved climate does not always guarantee improved productivity, therefore, principals must not seek climate or morale to its own end without concern for productivity measures such as student achievement outcomes.

Unfortunately, such findings may be an additional source of conflict for building principals. Principals have tremendous demands made on their time, yet this research suggests they spend more time engaged in cooperative conflict resolution behaviors than with the more expedient competitive or withdrawal behaviors.

Although leadership continues to generate considerable interest and research, results may often be disappointing or elusive. In this study, principals' personality predisposition was not statistically related to their self-attributed conflict resolution behavior. Correlation coefficients were in the predicted direction, but no relationships were found.

Principals need to be aware of their own behavior in managing conflict issues and their own style or preference for identifying and managing conflict in their schools. Principal training programs should stress the importance of self-awareness and the productive utilization of cooperative conflict resolution strategies.

Finally, this research has pointed to two issues that require further exploration. First, school researchers should extend cooperation theory to further understand the dynamics between principals' and teachers' interactions in the work place. Second, there is enough evidence in this study to suggest that teachers, as a group, are highly committed to their work. Future research should be conducted to determine the antecedents of teacher commitment, and the relationships between commitment and positive organizational outcomes.

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